

Vietnamese Struggles

A Review of the First Decade of Communism in Vietnam

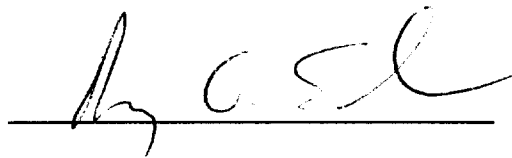
An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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Purpose of Thesis

This discussion of Vietnam and its people is limited to four major aspects: the communist policy of re-education for the South Vietnamese after the Vietnam War; the social conditions of post-American War South Vietnam, especially Saigon; the policy of New Economic Zones initiated by the communist government; and the refugee exodus that followed. All events discussed have taken place in the decade following the 1972 evacuation of South Vietnam by American forces. This research paper outlines, chronologically, the events that have helped shape Vietnam into an emerging nation through the words of Vietnamese and knowledgeable Westerners. The bulk of this project stems from my interest in the Vietnamese people after an excursion to Vietnam in 1997. The opening pages focus on my personal perceptions of the Vietnamese and their land in the years following the introduction of *Doi Moi* by the communist government.

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Prologue

It appeared as though the arrival of communism into South Vietnam would not be as bad as the Western Press had predicted it to be. The Bo Doi built fires along the streets with trees they had chopped down that lined the boulevard only moments before while the skeptical Southerners looked on with amazement. Like the ignorance displayed by the Northern cadres, the South Government and most of its supported would be tricked into subservience before they had been given the chance to recognize the severity of the situation.

The following paper outlines the plight of the Southern war-supporters and their families throughout a decade of famine and death that resulted after the Communist regime of Vietnam took hold of the entire country. It will examine the chaos that took Vietnam and many of its people after 30 April 1975 socio-politically and socio-economically. The purpose of this research is to show the contemporary history of the Vietnamese in terms of social, economic and political terms, not only for the westerners who lived through the change to communism, but for those who never got the opportunity to realize the severity of the situation. Much of what we understand of the situation as Westerners is through the eyes of relocated refugees. Unfortunately, the views of these refugees, many of which may be bad, represent only half of the truth. The other side of the argument, which is that of communist party officials, may never be uncovered due to governmental regulations.

Sympathy, then, is something that the Vietnamese do not want or need. To understand thoroughly, we as westerners must find a way to empathize with these people. It is my intent to display the inhumanity that brought a wounded nation even farther into the abyss, and what, if anything, was able to slow its downward spiral.

As I arrived in Tan Son Nhut airport in Ho Chi Minh City on 11 May 1998, the stories finally began to materialize. The mass of deprived and distraught lined the city streets, perched on the curbs for their daily urinal break and a glimpse at the strangers in the European bus. We were no different than anything they had seen before, and now indifferent to us. As tourists, we represented money, but only for “The People,” and not for the people. “Tiger,” our Vietnamese tour guide, led us through the streets of Vietnam’s most modern city as women defecated in the bushes along the road. Poverty

was the only word that came to my mind that first day. It also became a recurring theme throughout the weeks I spent traveling north from “Saigon.” Did the city sleep, I asked myself? At dawn, the same people from the evening before were still crouched in their own unique Vietnamese fashion. The cyclo-drivers (those older men whom earned a living by peddling persons from one area of the city to another) were emaciated and quick to take a smoke from a foreigner.

One day I woke early and traversed up the staircase to the veranda atop the Vien Dong hotel to catch a glimpse of Ho Chi Minh City at sunrise. A vast expanse of shanties lined the back streets of the city that the street-front façade tended to hide so well twenty stories below. The more I researched, the more I was to discover the immense complexities that surrounded the situation. The pedi-cab (three-wheeled scooters which served as motorized cyclos) drivers were those men who had fought half their lives for freedom, and were given back very little at all. When did it all begin? Gia Phong! (The Day of Liberation)

On December 18, 1959, Ho Chi Minh stated:

The capitalists often circulate the slander that our socialist regime does not respect the personal interests of the citizen. But in reality only our regime really serves the interests of the people and develops democracy to enable the people to take an effective part in the management of the State (Therefore our draft-amended Constitution gives)...

The right to work

The right to rest

The right to study

The right to personal liberty

Freedom of opinion, of the press, of assembly, of association

The right to hold demonstrations

Freedom of religious belief, to adhere or not to adhere to a religion

The right to elect and stand for election¹

¹ James Pickney Harrison, The Endless War: Fifty Years of Struggle in Vietnam. New York: The Free Press, 1982. 304-305.

As the South Vietnamese were to experience later first-hand, the words of hope spoken by Uncle Ho would manifest into nothing more than the typical communist rhetoric the Vietnamese would come to loathe.

In the early 1960's, American Advisory personnel in Vietnam helped organize a coup against Diem that was led by his own generals. The failure by the U.S. to find a suitable replacement for Diem convinced President Johnson of the United States to commence heavy bombings of the North and commit U.S. ground troops to help the South Vietnamese Republican Army protect areas below the 17th parallel.

In 1972, the U.S. decided to withdraw after losing some 60,000 American troops and personnel. Peace negotiation began in Paris, France. After very heavy bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong by the Americans, the conference resumed on 8 January, 1973. Hanoi signed the peace pact on 27 January. The peace pact was entitled "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam," and is generally known as the Paris Accords or the Paris Agreement. In it the United States was required; (1) to stop all its military activities against North Vietnam; (2) not to continue its military involvement or intervene in the internal affairs of South Vietnam; and (3) to withdraw from South Vietnam all its troops, military advisors and military personnel within 60 days. No provisions in the agreement openly required North Vietnam to withdraw its troops from South Vietnam or to stop infiltrating them into the South.² In the first two months after the cease-fire, more than 30,000 NVA personnel were infiltrated into Vietnam via Laos and Cambodia. By the late fall of 1973, according to American intelligence reports,

2 Nguyen Van Canh with Cooper, Earle, Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1983. 1-4.

about 70,000 NVA troops had illegally entered the South; by early 1975, the figure had reached 170,000. Between 28 January and mid-April 1973 alone, over 7,000 illegal NVA military truck crossings occurred between the DMZ and South Vietnam. During 1973, the north constructed twelve airfields and installed SAM-2 missiles in the South.

When the Americans left, Vietnam subsequently lost an average of a 1.5 billion dollars a year that the U.S. had been spending in the South. It was money that had seriously corrupted major elements of the population and had turned South Vietnam into a non-productive, consumer society, but it had artificially kept a bankrupt economy afloat. Once the money ceased to appear, Vietnam began to feel the effects. The South Vietnamese government slowly began to crumble because the government could not sustain itself without American aid. Simultaneously, China made drastic reductions in the material and technical aid that it had been providing to the North.³ Therefore, the end of the Second Indochina War left both sides at a financial loss.

On April 21, 1975, South Vietnamese President Thieu went on Saigon television to announce his resignation due to the imminent downfall of his country and the charges brought against him by militant anti-Communist Catholic priest Father Tran Huu Thanh of wide corruption. In his tearful resignation, Thieu had promised to stay on as a “fervent fighter” defending his country to the end. What his people did not know was that he was warming the engines on his C118 he planned to escape on after the resignation. So loaded with fifteen ton of gold and presidential relatives that it needed extra runway, the U.S. Air Force transport flew Thieu to Taiwan, where the next day he bitterly attacked

³ David Dellinger, Vietnam Revisited. Boston: South End Press, 1986, 163.

the American betrayal of the GVN.⁴ This defining moment in South Vietnamese history leads me to believe that when the end finally came, no one, including Thieu, was willing to accept responsibility.

On April 22nd, Tran Van Huong, a 71 year old former school teacher from the Delta succeeded Thieu as president, claiming “Thieu flees destiny. I embrace it.”⁵ On 28 April, General Duong Van Minh, the leader of the coup that ousted President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, replaced Huong as president. Disfavored in Saigon in the 1960’s because of his neutralism, Minh was a logical candidate to negotiate a peace settlement with the North Vietnamese. As Minh delivered his acceptance speech, Nguyen Thanh Trung, a communist infiltrator in the South Vietnamese Air Force, led a flight attack on Saigon’s Tan Son Nhut Airport with five abandoned American A-37 fighter planes, destroying all remaining aircraft for evacuation. On 30 April, General Minh delivered a formal declaration of surrender, ending years of turmoil between the North and the South. Questions still abound as to whether Minh was acted as the last South Vietnamese patriot or whether he did it in an attempt to curry favor with the new government.

Before the fall of Saigon, Hanoi had been planning to annex South Vietnam within the decade. The communist leaders were well aware of the great socioeconomic and cultural differences between the North and the South. The standard of living in South Vietnam was much higher, and the people had gotten accustomed to the economic standard of living that emerged when America was still in the war. Free enterprise had been in operation, and there was no system of strict control over the people at large. Nor

⁴ Thomas Taylor, Where the Orange Blooms. New York, New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co, 1989, 234.

⁵ Nguyen Ngoc Ngan with E.E. Richey, The Will of Heaven, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1982, 56.

were the western values such as material possessions and financial independence from the state adopted by the South Vietnamese people compatible with the communist values that were more traditional in nature. Hanoi therefore looked to a slow and gradual integration of the South Vietnamese society into the northern one, a process that would allow for “certain realities and specific characteristics of the two zones.”⁶

As the Viet Cong, or Bo Doi, made their way through the city, many ARVN officials began to burn their uniforms and clothing which associated them with the South Vietnamese Army. Saigon Radio, now under the control of the Bo Doi, exclaimed that every homeowner would display on his house the flag of the NLF, the flag of North Vietnam, and a picture of Ho Chi Minh. Saigon became a city of engulfed in anarchy. In the absence of any law enforcement body, vandalism and looting became rampant. Some unsubstantiated rumors floated around that, as the ARVN officials dropped their weapons, looters picked up the discarded arms and created instant chaos. As Nguyen Ngoc Ngan noted in his work, The Will Of Heaven, “[the looters] broke into homes and robbed and raped in a wild orgy that was terminated only with the arrival of the North Vietnamese Army. If nothing else, the NVA did bring a kind of order and stability to a city faced with general anarchy.”⁷

Immediately following the fall of Saigon on 30 April, 1975, there was no formal government in South Vietnam. After the Communist’s victory, all the front organizations that they had created specifically to wage war against the South were either dissolved or merged with North Vietnamese organizations. Thus, the so-called Peoples Revolutionary

⁶ Canh, 18-19.

⁷ Nguyen Ngoc Ngan, 142.

Party, which had led only a nominal existence during the war, now had no reason to exist.⁸ In response, Hanoi called down thousands of its own cadres from the North to help which the transitional process Vietnam as a whole was about to undergo.

Vietnam Under Communism

Historian Gabriel Kolko noted that, to many untrained observers, the legacy of the war was economic: the war's physical damage and urgent reconstruction needs, decades of neglected development, and infinite material problems. Foreign observers, says Kolko, tend to reduce every nation's basic problems to economics, because to judge them in all their inordinately complex dimensions defies numbers and requires far greater knowledge and sensibility. Kolko, however, took a different view of the situation, stating in his work Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace,

But in Vietnam's case such a simplification is impossible, for its single most important challenge after the war was to rebuild the lives of millions of civilians and soldiers who had suffered and sacrificed without limit. They expected that their needs and problems would receive the highest priority, and the party both explicitly promised and morally obligated itself to use the peace to fulfill its historic compact with the masses. Economic criteria alone cannot be employed to judge any society's success, least of all one that claims to be socialist. The only just and rational gauge must be the lot of the people.⁹

To underestimate the complexities of the situation in Vietnam, then, would lead one to incorrectly assume that the problems that faced the nation after the end of the war were purely economic.

Initially, apart from local vendettas and public trials against some people connected with the former regime, there was little vengefulness. Soon after, the citizens

⁸ Canh, 11.

⁹ Gabriel Kolko, Vietnam: Anatomy of a Peace, London, U.K.: Routledge, 1997, 8.

of Saigon watched as the young and old were shot by local cadres for looting and general misbehavior. Once the victory celebration wore off, the party officials and military commanders on the spot declared open season on the previous regime's western culture. Gangs of youth enthusiasts were secretly ordered or incited to destroy as much of the culture as they could. "Early in May, the Communists burned every book in the libraries of the Saigon University Faculty of Law and Faculty of Letters; the books, they said, came from a decadent culture. Circulation of all other books, as well as art work such as music tapes, records, films, and even paintings, was prohibited."¹⁰

The peculiar nature of the urbanization process for the communists in South Vietnam created a large set of social problems, one which would absorb much of the limited resources of the state budget in the years directly after the war. Specifically, this was the large number of people who required rehabilitation before they could re-enter the labor force. The regime's own estimates were that the South Vietnamese cities contained some 100,000 drug addicts, 500,000 prostitutes, 400,000 war invalids, and about a million orphans. Five to six percent of the population was thought to have venereal diseases.¹¹ Orphanages and rehabilitation centers were established promptly in the weeks after Gia Phong, but these were on too limited a scale to be able to deal with the problems quickly and outwardly.

A 1974 study by the University of Michigan estimated that there were in Saigon itself a half million prostitutes, a half million drug addicts and 300,000 full-time thieves. In addition, it is estimated that for the whole of occupied South Vietnam there were three

¹⁰ Canh, 146-147.

¹¹ Melanie Bereford, Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society, London: Pinter Publishers, 1988, 58.

million afflicted with venereal diseases, a million suffering from TB and an average of 430,000 children dying each year from mal-nutrition, disease and American bombings.¹² Hanoi denied all of these allegations but allowed no international organizations to enter the country to assess the validity or invalidity of the claims.

Thought Reform

The “liberation” of the South was causing North Vietnam other problems as well. Internally, transportation and communication were open to people of both zones after the victory. People traveled back and forth in search of relatives lost during the war. To the northerners traveling south, their dismay at the South Vietnamese high standard of living shocked them tremendously. In addition, South Vietnamese culture was smuggled into North Vietnam in the form of books, poems, and music, and was soon being passed from hand to hand among northerners everywhere. The state mass media had to be mobilized to attack the supposedly artificial prosperity of the South Vietnamese economy, which was pumped full of dollars by American imperialists. To much an extent, this accusation was true. The decadent culture of the South Vietnamese, the northern media reported, had poisoned the South Vietnamese people and now this culture was spreading to the north. Conversely, southerners became aware of conditions in the north. The Vietnamese leadership became convinced that if the unification of the country could not be carried out soon, they would have a hard time not only in subduing the South Vietnamese people, but also in taking control of the country as a whole.¹³

¹² Dellinger, 112.

¹³ Canh, 19-20.

The Communist leaders thus concluded that action had to be taken quickly. To deal with this problem, a May 3rd communiqué from the communist Military Management Section that had taken charge of ARVN General Headquarters directed all former South Vietnamese military men and all civilians employed at the headquarters to register with the new regime at designated offices from May 4-6. At the same time, they were to turn in all ARVN documents, equipment, and weapons in their possession. This communiqué, overlooked in most subsequent accounts, was a portent of things to come. Also on 3 May, the Saigon Gia Dinh City Military Management Committee made its well known Order Number 1 regarding the registration of current ARVN personnel. To implement the order, the committee issued a communiqué, dated 7 May, that specified in detail the times and places at which various categories of persons were to report, register, and turn in their weapons. Generals were to report 8-9 May, colonels from 8-11 May, and other commissioned officers from 8-14 May. NCO's and private soldiers, plus all military personnel in cooperation with civilian agencies, were ordered to report and register in the same way as the others on active duty. Registration for the entire ARVN was needed to allow the new government to assess its citizens individually and was to be completed by the end of the month. On the same day the committee issued a separate order stating slightly altered requirements for all police, front top-ranking officers to ordinary civilian employees; all members of government administration agencies down to the rank of deputy director; all senators and congressmen; and all justices of the Supreme Court. On 23 May, an issue was sent by the Saigon Education Section that required all teachers

to report for registration as well.¹⁴ This final communique served as a warning light that the entire social structure of South Vietnam would soon be under scrutiny.

Ironically, most ARVN supporters chose to register, whether out of fear or patriotic duty. A specific timeline of events is hard to discern due to the fact that most of the written material we possess was written as an afterthought. With this said, it was clear that, by the beginning of June, the communists from the North had decided on what to do with many of its “new citizens.” Although they did not know how to control the whole city yet because of the inability to collect any revenue, they began to publicize a re-education program. Granted, they were dealing with some extremely large numbers to “re-educate.” Hanoi felt that the 1.1 million regular troops in addition to a half-million para-military forces, 125,000 police and 350,000 civil service officers were unreliable for the goals of the new regime.

On 10 June, the Saigon military Management Committee appealed to both civilian and military subjects of the former regime to “reform themselves and to cleanse their wrongs in order to quickly become honest citizens, loving the fatherland and peace, and return to the nation.” The appeal encouraged them to “make quick progress,” an outcome that would favorably affect consideration of whether their rights as citizens should be restored. On the same day, the committee issued another order on how this opportunity for self-reform would be administered. It began, for reasons that later became clear, with those of lower rank. All NCOs, privates, civilian employees of the ARVN, and lower-

¹⁴ Kolko, 189-90.

ranking civil servants were to undergo three days of instruction, designated as *hoc tap*, at predetermined locations where they had already registered.¹⁵

Around the 15th of June, the communists ordered all high-ranking officers to report for *hoc tap* bringing with them food for thirty days. Around the 24th of June, the captains were called to report, bringing with them ten days worth of food. Likewise, the end of June saw the reporting of all other officers, bringing with them enough rations for three to five days. As Nguyen Thi Yen Nga (the wife of a former ARVN official in Saigon) noted,

We all thought that the non-commissioned officers would only be away for three to five days, the junior officers for ten days, the high-ranking officers for thirty days and so on. We based this on the number of day's food supply they were told to bring. If the communists had let it be known that they (the re-educated) would be there such a long time, no one would have shown up.¹⁶

Our limitations lie in the fact that our only significant sources were those who lived through the ordeal and were willing to talk about it. Others more knowledgeable about the situation can only speculate on the events because the government still holds such authority over its citizens. Even "Tiger," our Vietnamese guide, declined to rebuke or clarify the situation any further.

Consistent with communist claims, some 400,000 persons-that is ARVN officers, senior officials, and other notables- had registered for re-education. Most who registered were local authorities who, it appeared, did in fact report for re-education at the prescribed times and places. In Saigon alone, 336 of the 345 colonels, 1752 out of the

¹⁵ Canh, 190.

¹⁶ Scott, 79. Written by Nguyen Thi Yen Nga in "Even the Lampposts."

1,800 lieutenant colonels, and 4,700 out of 5,000 majors register and actually reported for re-education.¹⁷

Announcements said to bring clothes, mosquito net, and enough food for the prescribed number of days each person was to be re-educated. In addition, the announcement said to bring plenty of paper and a good pen. In a political education session for intellectuals in Saigon at the end of July, someone asked how long the education and thought-reform sessions would last, since a month had elapsed and the trainees had not returned home. Mai Chi Tho, then secretary of the City Party Committee, replied, “The government’s communiqué said they were asked to bring food for only a month, the communiqué did not say anything that the education period is one month.”¹⁸

By the end of July, the re-education process, a thirty-three day ordeal, had turned out to be a prison for many South Vietnamese officials, high and low grade. The camps were placed throughout Vietnam to facilitate the new governments’ plan for social reconstruction. While in the re-education camps, the prisoners’ families were allowed to visit their relatives once a week, for twenty minutes each session. During these sessions, no family member was allowed to show emotion. This was because the government felt that if a prisoner showed emotion, it would serve as a sign that the prisoners were not adequately acquainted with the reasons behind *hoc tap*. Under the direct supervision of the communist cadre guards, the prisoners and their families sat in small huts. Members of the re-education camps were expected to defoliate the surrounding area for agricultural

¹⁷ Canh, 198.

¹⁸ Canh, 192.

use and learn to farm efficiently. Sowing seed and cultivating the rice from the land became the major job of many political prisoners. Apparently, the communist organizers did a good job at selecting people to work in each group, as many had a handful of engineers, teachers, and doctors among them to help unite different groups under the spirit of communism. Prisoners were forced to eat rotten rice, consumed only by pig as feed. In everything the prisoners were asked to do, suffering was the intended objective. Whether the re-educatees suffered communally or in isolation was a judgment by the prison cadres as the quickest, most practical way to total control. To counter increase of citizen complaints, Hanoi issued a detailed and meticulous document on the reasons why and how the re-education process had to be carried out as planned. Taylor Thomas has noted in his work, Where the Orange Blooms,

The NVA Journal (People Army publication, June 1975) described what needed to be done: Re-education is a meticulous and long-range process. Management must be tight, continuous, comprehensive, and specific. We must manage each person. We must manage their thoughts and actions, words and deeds, philosophy of life and ways of livelihood, as well as social relationships. We must closely combine management and education with interrogation and punishment of every degree.¹⁹

Days ran into weeks while prisoners attended reform session and performed hard labor. Although each camp was somewhat different in the ways in which their prisoners were treated, a typical day in a re-education camp would follow a general pattern. In the morning, each prisoner would get a small portion of food, usually the rotten rice normally used as pig feed. The fungus and bacteria on the food would cause stomach discomfort and bloating. In some camps, the prisoners would dig into the ground to find edible roots and wild potatoes. Starvation and disease would run rampant throughout some camps

¹⁹ Taylor, 255. This excerpt was taken from a story told by Cai, a South Vietnamese man who was forced to return to his former village and till his ancestors land as a result of the clearing of Saigon.

which, although they contained doctors as prisoners, did not have access to medical facilities or treatment. Staying alive, then, became the main goal for most of the prisoners. For prisoners such as Son Ha, a young male doctor who served during the war, the situation is difficult to relive. In one of his short stories in Lesleyanne Hawthorne's, Refugees: The Vietnamese Experience, Son Ha writes,

When I lived in the camp, my dreams centered always on my total deprivation of all the things that had always been essential to me. I dreamt myself eating meat, fish, and sugar. Smokers in the camp dreamt of watching themselves smoke to their hearts' content. At Christmas time, the families of camp inmates were allowed to send a gift package, weighing not more than three kilos, one to each prisoner. The gifts were sent in faith, because the senders did not know the whereabouts of their husbands or sons. They were simply instructed to send their parcels to Box Number 7590. My wife sent me some salted pork, half a kilo of loaf sugar, one tin of condensed milk, needles and thread, writing paper and pencils. She also included in the package a small sachet of five spices in powder form, dried lemon grass, and chilies so that I could hide the flavor of the new meat: rat. Rats were a popular source of food. Every night we set traps around the camp to catch them. These huge sewer rats were briefly singed over a fire, and then skinned. Due to an order which forbade us to keep anything pointed or sharp, or any iron pieces longer than twenty centimeters, I had to gut the rats with my fingers, yanking off and tossing away the head and four paws; then, spicing the remnants with my five spice powder, salt and lemon grass, I barbecued the carcass.²⁰

Many reports, like this one presented to us by Son Ha, a young Vietnamese male doctor who was a medical officer during the war, depict life in the camps as gruesome and inhumane. Through his words, a grotesque picture is painted for those who inadvertently stumble upon his passages.

Undoubtedly, these prisoners suffered greatly from the conditions of the camp itself. However, the worst part of a prisoner's day may have been the period spent outside the protective walls of their camps. From dawn until dusk, many prisoners would work

²⁰ Lesleyanne Hawthorne, Refugee: The Vietnamese Experience, Melbourne, Australia: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982, 146. This excerpt was taken from a story written by Son Ha, a young male Vietnamese doctor of Catholic rural background who spent many years in Communist re-education camps after serving in the ARVN as a medical officer

outside the camp wall, defoliating the forest or clearing mines so that the land could be cultivated.

Mine clearing was a practice expressly forbidden by the Geneva Convention, the universally accepted standard of humane treatment of Prisoner's of War. The communists chose to ignore this for three primary reasons. First, as a newly united nation, they were not signatories to the Geneva Convention. Secondly, because the prisoners had actually "volunteered" for re-education, they were not considered by Hanoi to be POW's. Third, the volunteers may have planted the mines in the first place and were therefore responsible for their removal. This last reason assumed that all within the walls of the camps were military personnel, and not the hundreds of thousands of noncombatant military forces that actually made up the majority of the prisoners in the camps.²¹

If the prisoners were not clearing mines, they were defoliating the jungle for agricultural use. The construction of all tools was left to the discretion of the workers themselves. Galvanized-iron roofing sheets were used to make water containers and watering cans.

To make rudimentary tools such as saw blades, steel was gathered from areas where the Americans had used it to tie pallets together. These steel bars were then cut into lengths and used chisels to cut a row of teeth along each edge, bending alternate teeth out to the sides. These tools would be used to take down small trees to use as firewood and building lumber for new houses and camps that were to be built later.²²

After the sun had set for the day, the workers would move from "re-education through labor" to "re-education through indoctrination." Interrogations and political

²¹ Taylor, 266.

²² Hawthorne, 149.

discussions were led throughout the remainder of the evening. Prisoners awaiting interrogation were placed into CONEX containers left by the Americans. A long strip of metal was placed inside the container to shackle the legs to the pole, and the hands were tied behind the back. Escape from these cells was impossible, as was the hope of going to the bathroom. Prisoners would lie in their own defecation and urine until called upon by the camp directors for interrogation. Some would lie in these containers for days on end.

If, however, prisoners were able to avoid detention of this sort, political indoctrination would be forced upon the detainees. The camp cadres would read to the prisoners from a communist text and then ask if anyone had questions. If the prisoners did ask questions, the cadres would be under the assumptions that the prisoners did not hold the correct views, and would then be dealt with individually. The period of study would last until very late in the evening, well past the point of resistance for many whom required a full nights rest with adequate provisions. If the prisoners chose to agree with the indoctrination without question, the period of study would end. However, if a prisoner offended any cadre during this period, they would be taken away to special camps from which no one returned. The communist cadres in charge of the brainwashing were all North Vietnamese. These cadres had been taught beforehand that all the prisoners in the camps had come because they had lost their Vietnamese characteristics while working as the tools of American imperialism and had lost all humanity while being extremely cruel to their own people.²³ It seems now that brainwashing was

²³ Al Santoli, To Bear Any Burden, New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc, 1985, 278-279.

necessary and commonplace throughout the programs enacted by the Vietnamese Communist Party.

After the political indoctrination sessions had ended, prisoners who had been informants for the camp authorities were given official permission to force themselves on the women visitors sleeping in the huts. This privilege, as many camp cadres announced, was a reward for progress in re-education. What went unexplained was that these visiting women were the wives and girlfriends of other inmates who had come to visit their significant others. Under the direct supervision of the guards, the prisoners told not to mention anything of the camps conditions themselves.²⁴

By the end of August, 1975, camps like Long Khanh, capacity 22,500, had been built to house the ever-increasing population of residents. In the Phu Yen province, out of a total population of 300,000, there were more than 6,000 prisoners in seven camps. During the war, the population of South Vietnam was estimated by American officials at about 17 million. By Autumn 1975, Hanoi estimated a population of 24 million. If the Phu Yen prison was characteristic of all former South Vietnam, anywhere between 340,000 to 480,000 could actually have been detained.²⁵

Many reports, like the one presented to interested parties by Son Ha, a young Vietnamese male doctor who was a medical officer during the war, depicted the inhumanity:

Whether detained at home or in one of the camps, all political prisoners had to undergo *cai tao tu tuong*, or thought reform. In official documents, it was always referred to as *cai tao* (thought reform or re-education) or simply as *hoc tap* (education or study), but it was more than these innocuous terms suggest. Prisoners were systematically

²⁴ T. Louis Brown, War and Aftermath in Vietnam, London: Routledge, 1991, 68.

²⁵ Steven Cohen, Vietnam: Anthology and Guide to a Television History, New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1983, 356

indoctrinated by being made to read party newspapers and magazines, listen to government radio broadcasts, and attend classes held by party instructors. After each class session they had to write reports on the subject matter at hand. At regular intervals, they also had to write statements of self-criticism. A form of brainwashing, the prisoners had to acknowledge that his past, with the complete way of thought connected with it, had been a mistake. Thought reform is a process enabling the mind to part with what is bad as to assimilate what is good.²⁶

The official line was that all the prisoners would either be re-educated to the point of reconciliation or brought to justice for their crimes against the state, whatever that may entail. For the communist government cadres, it was an opportunity to see just how far their program of re-education could carry the newly-united country. The period set for completing this process was- as the public learned from a PRG policy statement issued a full year later, on 25 May, 1976- three years from the initial date of detention.²⁷ The policy set forth in May of 1976 was a more intricate version of the one issued a full year before, and it still adopted the same strategy on clemency as the last one. No mention was made of how long the most serious of offenders would be kept, as many noncombatants still felt that if the three years was applicable at all, it surely would not apply to those high-ranking officials who were regularly moved from jungle camp to jungle camp. It became uncertain, then, to who, if any, the three-year limit would apply.

Word slowly came in to the United Nations as more refugees from these concentration camps began to tell their stories. Camp sizes, as one would expect, varied a great deal over time due to death and diseases. Some held as many as 5,000-6,000 prisoners at any given point, but much more typical were the camps that held from 2,000-4,000. According to the American Embassy in Bangkok, the Suoi Mau Camp in Dong

²⁶ Canh, 188-189.

²⁷ Canh, 195.

Nai Province held about 6,000 prisoners and the Gia Lai-Cong Tum about 5,000 in May of 1981, six years after the first reports of re-education trickled out.²⁸

There appeared to be no uniform system for naming the re-education camps from reports given after the fact. Many refugees reported that many times the camps are named after the nearest village or hamlet. Hanoi designated each camp with a code number that correlated with the region it was located in. Each central camp, like the one at Long Khanh, was generally divided into a number of sub-camps under the direction of a single camp headquarters. For security reasons, so that the relatives of prisoners could send letters without being told where they were, each camp was officially known by its own code number and each sub-camp by a serial number that is appended to the code number.²⁹

There also appears to have been an intricate system as to where each prisoner would be sent, according to the severity of his or her crimes against the state. Many of the camps in the north were reserved for the most serious of offenders, those who owed a 'blood-debt to the people.' The closer one was to Hanoi, the more dangerous the communists believed the prisoner to be. Once in the northern camps, prisoners were lucky to live throughout the tenure of their indefinite stay. The southern camps, since they held the largest categories of prisoners, tended to be more specialized in their crimes and thought to be less of a threat to the state.

²⁸ Canh, 199-200.

²⁹ Canh, 200.

Through the eyes of the communists, the re-education program served as a necessity to the regime's system of security. Communist re-education camps have existed in North Vietnam for over 30 years, even farther back than 1954. Even as late as 1982, there were still some 200 camps in existence throughout the greater part of Vietnam. Author Nguyen Van Canh noted in his book, Vietnam Under Communism, 1975-1982, "The more totalitarian a regime, the more extensive a camp system is needed in order to stamp out opposition. That is why so many re-education camps are being built in Vietnam today and why they will continue to be built as long as Vietnam is communist."³⁰

Upon release from the re-education camps, all political prisoners were expected to adhere to strict policy guidelines set forth by the communist party. The restoration of citizenship (which was usually not granted until a year-long probationary period was met) depended upon what had been accomplished through the course of the year to better the community. Usually this meant that the government could assign a former prisoner to reconstructive projects in their home-city or village. Most orders of release contained provisions that led to home control and supervision by the local authorities.³¹

As lower-level ARVN officials were released from the re-education camps, some found their ways back into positions of responsibility.³² Many, however, were not able to qualify for citizenship due to their previous acquaintances with the Americans. Whether it was because they were formerly employed by the Americans or whether it was because they worked in conjunction with the imperialists on financial trades such as rice or black

³⁰ Canh, 222.

³¹ Lu Van Thanh, The Inviting Call of Wandering Souls, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997, 211.

³² Dellinger, 89.

market goods, the new government found reasons to make the re-educated unqualified.

As author Lu Van Thanh noted in her work entitled The Inviting Call of Wandering Souls,

The direct victims of the communist regime were the families of the former government's employees and personnel. Dependents of these families whose husbands, father and brothers were still held in the labor camps throughout the country led parsimonious lives in the cities. Life was hard in the former South Vietnam, with a serious shortage of rice and food, and the strict control of the local authorities.³³

In short, there has never been an accurate tally of the total number of South Vietnamese sent to re-education camps in the chaotic months after Gia Phong. Some were eventually released to survive as best as they could under a regime that considered them social and political outcasts. But many-- estimates run as high as 400,000-- former military officers, Saigon government officials and one time political leaders were held under harsh conditions, while Washington and Hanoi argued over terms for permitting them to enter the U.S. even as late as 1982.³⁴

By most standards, the reunification of Vietnam that took place while hundreds of thousands sat in prison cells was a *fait accompli* from the moment the North Vietnamese claimed victory in the South.

The notion that the country had been unified by some process of negotiations between northern and southern delegations, followed by the election on April 26, 1976, was nothing more than a propaganda stunt. Rail communications, which were destroyed during the war, were repaired to working order by the end of the year. The piaster, the South Vietnamese unit of currency, was also recalled and changed in September of the same year. As the northerners came down to the south, they brought with them their policies of "building Socialism": abolition of all significant private ownership; eradication of private commerce and trade; establishment of state industries; and the

³³ Lu Van Thanh, Pg 143.

³⁴ Robert Emmet Long, Vietnam Ten Years After, New York: The Reference Shelf, Vol 58, Number 2, The H.W. Wilson Co., 1986, 16.

introduction of state monopolies over education, broadcasting, the press, and postal facilities.³⁵

In the north, the party would step up 'socialist construction' and would perfect 'socialist relations,' that is to say, the private sector would be totally eliminated.

The end of 1975 uncovered a vast array of problems for the new government to handle. An estimated two million people were unemployed in Saigon alone and another million in the provinces. Also, nearly a half million disabled veterans roamed the streets of Saigon. Streets that once were filled with the noise of car horns have been replaced by the bicycle since the abolition of private ownership and the ever-growing shortage of fuel. It was not uncommon to see entire city blocks lined with bicycles parking areas on either side of the street. Neil Sheehan noted in his work, After the War was Over, that the city itself had also undergone a catharsis since Liberation Day, largely due to the traditional concepts that Hanoi reintroduced to Ho Chi Minh City after their arrival. "Beggars and prostitutes still roamed the streets, but not the legions of both that had existed during the war."³⁶ Many homeless slept on the sidewalks at night, but there were no teeming warrens like the slums of the peasant refugees who had fled the American bombing and shelling of the countryside. Political corruption on the part of government officials, on the other hand, still ran rampant.

The resources of the South often led to the corruption of all kinds from the northern convoys with closed covers on the top of each truck, each full of various materials and supplies that ran north from Saigon. Often these trucks carried electronics,

³⁵ Canh, 13.

³⁶ Sheehan, Neil, "After the War was Over," Random House, New York, 1991, 100-01.

canned goods, and rice to the impoverished citizens of Hanoi itself. Whether the food actually made it to those in need, or whether it went to supplement the income of powerful Communist officials, was unclear. Corruption and bribery were seen everywhere; a complete contrast to Ho Chi Minh's slogan, "Assiduity, economy, honesty, righteousness," and to be fair and just to everybody.³⁷ "In comparing the corruption or bribery under the communists to that of the former government of Thieu, some people ironically asserted that the communist cadres wished to receive the bribe before they helped, while the former government's employees would help first and then accept the bribe."³⁸

By 1976, the situation in Saigon had worsened to the point of chaos for the communists. The mass exodus to the countryside they had planned on had failed miserably because many of the relocated persons were unwilling to return to their ancestral villages for any length of time. Only a half million of her people had left, and hooliganism and prostitution were on the rise. The 700,000 unemployed eked out a meager existence by doing odd jobs or selling goods on the black market. The administration continued to suffer badly from a shortage of competent personnel, but it did not dare to bring back the well trained and disloyal re-education camp inmates for fear of spreading discontent.³⁹ Socially, the city began to suffer heavily.

The abolition of civil rights created an expansive problem for the new citizens of united Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communists began to deprive the people of their right to move, now effectively denied by a policy of 'household management.' According to

³⁷ Thanh, 144.

³⁸ Thanh, 144.

³⁹ Hawthorne, 121.

this policy, each member of the household had to file an adequate statement of his or her identity and background. On this basis, the Communists designated the place where the household would reside as its permanent location. If a person did need to go somewhere, they had to first obtain a permit from the local security office by pleading sufficient reason for the journey. The longer the journey was to be, the higher the level of security office that had to be applied to for permission to be granted. The state also secured a monopoly over the mass media. After the war, the south came under the same control as the north did after 1954 in terms of censorship by the government. Private citizens were not allowed to discuss political issues in the newspapers. Questions as to what was read were only to be addressed and discussed during local government or party meetings. However, the majority of those who did raise such questions on the issues were accused to harboring a “reactionary” spirit. They too, then, would run the risk of joining their compatriots in the re-education camps.

Food rationing became another means by which the Vietnamese Communist Party kept the general population under control. Without being adequately fed, the government surmised, the masses could not revolt. Rationing was based upon the household management system. Citizens of all ages were to have their names registered in a “family book.” Each registered member was allowed to purchase a prescribed amount of food at the official price. If dissenters were found by the VCP, it would result in their removal from the official registry. If episodes began to reoccur, the entire family could be erased from the registry altogether.

Saigon became a city under wraps. Children of former government employees were forced to drop out of school to earn money in the factories. Most of the jobs in and

around the city that were of any value were held by northern cadres that were sent from Hanoi to fill “vacated” position. Higher education was reserved primarily for those children whose parents were with the communist party, and almost strictly forbade females from the picture whatsoever.⁴⁰ Adolescents were punished for wearing European clothing or foreign-made shoes when they walked into a government office to process papers or into the local security post to request a pass, approval for a biographical sketch, or change of address. Often their punishment would result in a denied request. Indeed, 90% of their applications were rejected by the authorities.⁴¹

The primary concern of parents living in Vietnam was that their children could not enter college after graduating from high school. For the former employees of the SRV, their children were classified in the lowest of all categories. Although their applications for the college entrance exams had been accepted and they had successfully passed with high marks, their names were immediately crossed off the list of successful candidates. The vacant spaces in the list were then filled with the names of children of the officials highly placed in the current government, cadres, communist sympathizers, or students from families of communist troops who had been killed. In addition, youngsters in the southern regions were forced to register for the draft, which was another obligation of the citizens. When they reached the age of 18, all the teenagers from the south were registered for the draft, regardless of family status. They were compelled to report to the draft registration office every three months for medical check-ups, which were conducted to satisfy the urgent need for military strength in the Cambodian battlefields while the

⁴⁰ Nguyen Ngoc Ngan 187.

⁴¹ Thanh, 154-155.

Vietnamese waged war against their rivals in Cambodia.⁴² Because of the war and changing social conditions, the young of Vietnam grew up quickly.

Because the approach of the northerner to everyday life was vastly different from that of the southerner due to the harsh living conditions during the war, the new government decided that political education should be expanded to everyone.

When the VCP began their social reconstruction, all families were invited to send their children to the ward daycare, or indoctrination, center. Even if parents declined, which would arouse suspicion, all children in the neighborhood were organized into “Vanguard” groups, or “Assault Youth.” Membership was compulsory, and weekly meetings were held. Inquisitive parents could not attend and only learned of Vanguard activities by asking their children, a curiosity the VCP ordered the children to report. Vanguard cadres introduced the children to the practices of self-criticism and the criticism of others for unacceptable behavior. They learned to denounce each other for missing meetings, talking while they stood in military formation, removing their red scarves while “off-duty,” and other signs of insincere commitment.⁴³ While in Vanguard meetings with the young, the cadres would devote much time questioning the children about their parents, their living conditions, their future plans, and their closest relatives, along with the names of whom their parents conversed with on a daily basis. A misinterpretation of a situation by a child, such as an unannounced visit with a relative, could send his or her parents to re-education camp.

⁴² Thanh, 145.

⁴³ Thomas, 295.

Parents also had to worry about their children while they were at grammar school. First thing each morning, the children had to stand before the class and recite what had happened at home since the previous day. Nothing was too trivial to report: food at the evening meal, parents' conversations, any purchases, any sales, anything heard on the radio, and most important, any visitors. As Thomas Taylor noted in his novel, Where the Orange Blooms, "For information about a visitor, the teacher awarded a fruit tart sprinkled with sugar, a precious commodity in Saigon during the late 1970's. The teacher might work up her class by asking, Who will win a tart this morning?"⁴⁴ Larger awards were given to the children who reported anything their parents expressly asked them not to repeat. If information were given, the children would get candy for a week while their parents were called to the local security office for an interrogation from which they might not return.

For adults, the process of communist socialization was no easier. Every adult citizen was expected to join at least one party sponsored organization appropriate to his or her age, sex, occupation, religion, or other distinguishing characteristics. Accordingly, there were a number of organizations where the VCP ideology was taught to members and where party policies were discussed. All heads of households were ordered to go to such training sessions in the organization appropriate to their status. Thought reform, then, became an integral part of everyone's daily activities, whether in re-education camps or in their homes.

According to an article in Nhan Dan, the Vietnamese national newspaper, dated February 1977, almost 95% of the "puppet administration's personnel" had been set free

⁴⁴ Thomas, 329.

and enjoyed citizenship. If this report had been accurate, that would have meant that nearly one million people would have been released by 1977. Leaving aside the question of numbers, the persons released from re-education camps were not treated as full citizens, but probationary peoples. By the time the announcement in Nhan Dan appeared, it was obvious to most that the very few who in fact were released by 1977 were easily targeted for arrest and prosecution, even killed at any time without just cause. Many refugees have subsequently reported that while serving as probationary citizens, they were rounded up on holidays by local authorities and put under guard. In addition, neither they nor their wives and children were allowed to get substantial jobs.⁴⁵

By the time Amnesty International was able to sustain normal relations with the SRV, the communist-led government was being heavily scrutinized for its treatment of former South Vietnamese officials. In December 1979, Hanoi told the organization that it retained in detention some 26,000 of the one million people it had subjected to re-education after April of 1975. According to Hanoi officials, the term meant primarily a mental rather than physical forcing of the recognition of past sins and commitment to the new order. Again, there was a huge gap in information and interpretation, and enemies of the communists charge that the regime maintained through the 1970's up to 700,000 in forced labor and detention as severe or worse than that of previous governments in the South.⁴⁶ And on its side, Hanoi maintained, the question of wording came into focus. Hanoi still stated that the men and women who joined the process of thought-reform did

⁴⁵ Canh, 196.

⁴⁶ Harrison, 306.

so out of patriotism and loyalty to their new country. They were never forced to do so, and signed up on their own recognizance.

As noted earlier, much of what was independent South Vietnam was still richer than the victorious North immediately after the war. However, southerners all across the economic spectrum were notably worse off than they were before the departure of a half-million free-spending Americans and the end of the massive U.S. aid program.

Communist leaders frequently proclaimed that most of the ragged wartime beggars had disappeared from the streets of Saigon. While this was true, it was only because there was a disappearance from almost everyone of those from whom to beg. Those from the North lacked the currency to trade on the open market and those in Saigon feared to spend.

As Robert Emmet Long noted in his work, entitled, Vietnam Ten Years After, the

Lack of foreign exchange to buy petrol and spare parts had cleared away old Saigon's nerve-jangling traffic jams. The noisy, exhaust-fouled streets where Army trucks and Honda motor scooters once jostled for space became quiet byways occupied mainly by bicycles and pedicabs. Most of the few cars that still ran were occupied by privileged government or Communist Party officials. The downtown sidewalks that once throbbed far into the night to the beat of rock and soul music pouring from open doorways of profitable- often disreputable- girlie bar were deserted and dark after sunset. Many streetlights were turned off permanently to save scarce and expensive electric power.⁴⁷

Economically, Vietnam was in shambles after the war. Even by Asian standards, the economy of the new Vietnam was barely able to function. Annual income in the first two years after the war per capita was in the U.S. \$70.00-\$140.00 range, well below the \$219.00-\$2544.00 range for the ASEAN countries.⁴⁸ People who had relatives abroad

⁴⁷ Long, 14-15.

⁴⁸ Canh, 27.

were able to lead a more substantial existence. Their family income was in truth derived from these resources brought in from abroad, and it was obvious that the national economy was dependent on the daily flow of gifts on which the government imposed heavy taxes. To this, the government chose to turn a blind eye as long as they themselves received something in return financially. Profiteering in Saigon became rampant, partly due to the returning victims of re-education who came home to no jobs and no sources of income. Many took advantage of the situation by drawing on old colleagues in Singapore for capital to buy up scarce goods and either sell them locally for exorbitant prices or ship them abroad.⁴⁹

New Economic Zones

The government was struggling just as much. To counter the crisis, Hanoi knew that its principal resource was in the nation's work force. Once integrated, Vietnam had a work force of some 22 million people at its disposal. Besides laboring for himself every day to eke out an existence, every working person was expected to contribute 60 working days a year without compensation to build dams or dig irrigation systems for the government. Any dissention from the norm would be dealt with severely.

One way in which the SRV dealt with dissention was to create New Economic Zones, or NEZs. Erected in conjunction with thought reform, these NEZs became an act of forced resettlement. While the NEZs were set up as a population dispersal program aimed at political control rather than economic development, the government touted the agenda as a necessity for stability in the "New Vietnam." In essence, the NEZs were multipurpose concentration camps, strewn about the wilderness. They were also

⁴⁹ Thanh, 168.

convenient dump-sites for South Vietnamese who did not fit any of the communists' original categories for re-education. These Vietnamese included families of GVN members, small businessmen and schoolteachers whose subjects, such as history had been condemned. Buddhist monks; unproductive workers such as those with industrial injuries or war wounds and vagrants and owners of property coveted by the cadres were also targeted. To encourage relocation to an NEZ, the SRV would withhold ration cards, which prevented the purchase of rice except on the black market, denial of children's education, and the alternative of a re-education camp. NEZs, therefore, became an integral part of the workforce development strategy. The heaviest concentration of these pioneer agricultural communities was in southern Vietnam, mainly in the Mekong delta and coastal plains. A great deal of controversy surrounded the NEZs, and many Vietnamese saw them as certain death sentences. The government, however, apparently did not attempt to disguise some of the problems initially encountered in these areas. They openly embraced the need for clearing up the large military bases of South Vietnam which were still cluttered with bombs, mines, blockhouses, carcasses of vehicles and barbed-wired entanglements. Most NEZ contained around 5000 people of various trades and personal records.⁵⁰

Once the government announced the program to their cadres, neighborhoods began to be told by the sector propagandist. Each neighborhood, therefore, had a desk in charge of propaganda. Not only did these desks help move out thousands of families to the NEZs, but in doing so cleared the way for northerners coming down to Saigon to fill specific positions in the government. The population of Saigon dropped from four

⁵⁰ Bruce Grant, The Boat People: An Age Investigation, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1979, 24.

million to about three million people through the refugee outflow and transfers to the countryside, leaving ample space for the northern cadres. As the new government would later come to realize, the life of the carefree farmer would not sit well with those accustomed with the lights of the city.

For those who chose to remain outside the boundaries of the cities, life in the countryside was a complete departure from all they had learned in life before the communist insurrection. Some were escorted back to their native villages. Of course, the communists had replaced the traditional village chief with a northerner, in charge of everything that occurred in the village and responsible for productivity. A story told by Tran Van Xinh in Joanna Scott's Indochina's Refugees: Oral Histories from Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam relates the life of villagers displaced by the economic programs of the new SRV:

Every week, members of each household had to present themselves to the chief and give an account of all that they had done over the past week. A schedule was usually given to each member, on which they would write everyone they had talked with. In addition, each worker in the village was given a classification- A, B or C- according to how dangerous they were to the new regime. An "A" classification worker was considered the most dangerous to the new collective and security would keep tight control on them. No one ever knew their classification, but many workers could tell how they were perceived by the government by the precautions taken in their midst.⁵¹

A massive problem emerged when many people began escaping from the NEZ after a few months, walking back to Saigon and living on the sidewalks or the back rooms of friends' houses. By doing so, the workers gave up all rights to ration cards and citizenship, immediately being denounced by the SRV upon escaping back to urban

⁵¹ Scott, 79.

society. The dilemma was then transferred to the persons giving refuge. By taking in relatives, they risked not only persecution by the authorities if caught but certain

departure to the NEZs themselves. The problem became so severe in the late '70s that the Communists eventually had to stop trying to force people to go there. Politically, the government claimed that workers were still too heavily needed for the communist machine in the larger cities.

Since 1975, some half-million former army officials and civil servants have been the link by which mountainous and jungle areas have been cleared for cultivation. All along, Vietnam's top priority has been food production for survival. To many underdeveloped nations, the question of subsistence was a major motivating factor for deciding the policies that would govern the nation. For a variety of reasons, even the modest goals the Communist government set up were never met. Production figures for 1977 were never announced following a severe cold spell in January of that year. In August, the worst typhoon season in thirty years hit the central coast, wiping out 1.7 million tons of rice crops. In 1978, however, Vietnam applied to join the Communist Council for Mutual Assistance (COMECON), whose members were the Soviet Union, east European countries, Cuba, and Mongolia. In a gesture of goodwill toward these nations, rice production was officially admitted to have fallen 4.5 million tons short of requirements after the most severe flooding in Vietnamese history. As the government slowly began to crumble under the ever-tightening grip of a failing economy, many

Vietnamese people got scared, leading to the largest mass exodus in Vietnamese history.⁵²

The Vietnamese Refugee Crisis

When Saigon fell in April, 1975, many Vietnamese were prepared to leave the country. As Gail Kelly notes in her work From Vietnam to America, of the potential refugees:

Their reasons were many, derived from a Vietnamese rather than American context. Most left out of fear, acting as refugees. They abandoned their homes not because they wanted to establish roots elsewhere, but because they believed that present circumstances would not allow them to live as they had. Many conceived of their move as temporary and believed that once the battles were over they would return home as they had done many times before.⁵³

The reasons for a mass migration had not changed, but as the 1970s drew to a close, its social composition did. The first wave, in 1975, consisted of the educated of the country. The majority of them were military men and their families because the military had the necessary ships and planes. Many who left during this first wave were American dependents or associates who were airlifted out by American helicopters. Some fisherman came with the wave, since they too had boats. The next wave, after the communists had established control over South Vietnam in 1976, consisted mainly of fishermen and peasants living in coastal areas and along major rivers such as the Mekong.⁵⁴ They, too, had boats but could not get away quickly. Most of them had little to no formal education. For all who left, it was a question of being pushed rather than

⁵² Grant, Appendix A

⁵³ Gail Paradise Kelly, From Vietnam to America, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977, 17.

⁵⁴ Canh, 132.

pulled. For the sake of brevity, the parameters of this paper do not include the arrival or resettlement of the refugees once safely abroad.

To prevent any attempt to cross the South China Sea, the government began to set up a net of strict control during the annual January –August dry season. Also the bus terminals, the railway stations, and Route 1 were the main targets for unexpected searches. Security agents in civilian clothes approached suspected passengers who were waiting for a pedicab to ask for an ID card or an official pass.⁵⁵

According to the Vietnamese government, there were four ways of becoming a refugee. The first was escape, or *di chui*. People who chose this method would risk almost certain arrest if caught. They would organize the escape by themselves, in secret; if some of the preparations were visible, they would disguise them to look like something else. They may have built a fishing boat and then received a fishing license, and with the license, sold their fish to the state, which allowed them to buy gas. As they fished, they saved gas and eventually escaped.⁵⁶

The second way was escape with permission of local authorities, or *mua bai*. This method meant that a person would offer money to the local security authorities in charge of coastal areas. The escapes were made at night. There was some risk of higher-echelon officials having been informed or Naval Patrol forces detecting them before they had reached international waters. In that event, they would be arrested and put in prison; all their property would be confiscated by the state.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Thanh, 171.

⁵⁶ Canh, 129-30.

⁵⁷ Canh, 129-30.

The third was the semi-official way, or *di ban chinh thuc*. In this method, the provincial party would be in charge. Each refugee had to pay a specified amount of gold to the one in charge of the exodus. This person would have bought a vessel of some kind with all the necessary food and fuel for the voyage. He also had to pay a specified amount of gold to the provincial party committee. Each such vessel contained at the most a few hundred people. Before they were allowed to leave, the refugees were forced to offer their main possessions- their houses, cars, and so on- to the local party committee; they actually had to hand over the keys, with the title deed and other papers. Their vessel, while it sailed out to international waters, was escorted by naval forces ships and then shown which way to go.⁵⁸

The final way was official registration, or *di dang ky chinh thuc*. This program was conducted by the Central Committee and dealt exclusively with the ethnic Chinese. Those who wished to leave must register at one of several offices in Ho Chi Minh City. Family books had to be turned in so that the names could be cross-checked. After being selected, they also had to pay a specified amount of gold to the central committee. Of the four, the majority of the peoples who left chose to do so by the first method, or a variation there of due to the overwhelming poverty of those who attempted escape.⁵⁹

The numbers of boat people in 1975-76 rose steadily, but they actually constituted a very small minority compared with the flood yet to come. In 1975, excluding those who left with the Americans, there were 377. In 1976, the total per annum was 5619. In 1977, the total for the year was 21,276. These were the numbers of safe arrivals, either in

⁵⁸ Canh, 129-130.

⁵⁹ Canh, 129-130.

United Nations High Commission Refugees camps or resettled, not of departures. Nor, of course, did the figures include those who had been caught while escaping or who died.⁶⁰

As evident by the figures, the Communist government was losing its people by incarceration and desertion. In the controversy about the officially approved exodus from southern Vietnam that developed after 1977, it was often forgotten that clandestine escapes continued at the same time as officially sanctioned departures. The latter was begun to rid members of Vietnam's ethnic Chinese minority, although ethnic Vietnamese were able to buy their way into this channel as well. On the other hand, some Chinese continued to leave secretly, although Vietnamese made up a majority of the boat escapes. Overall, a reliable estimate is that about one-third of all people who left Vietnam post-1975 did so covertly.⁶¹

For large numbers of boat refugees, possibly as many as one-third of all who left before 1979, the voyage from southern Vietnam to a country of first asylum in non-communist Southeast Asia was relatively uneventful. But particularly from 1978 onwards, several factors narrowed the chances of a safe crossing and quick entry into an UNHCR-protected camp. As Bruce Grant notes in his book, The Boat People,

One was the failure of the advanced industrial democracies, where the boat refugees hoped to settle, to take them at anywhere near the rate at which they were pouring into the country, especially Malaysia, Thailand, and later, Indonesia. Another was that Thailand, followed by Malaysia, pushed boat refugees back to sea, partly out of frustration at the failure of the west to do more to alleviate the crisis. The third factor that diminished the chances of a safe passage from Vietnam was piracy.⁶²

⁶⁰ Grant, 31.

⁶¹ Grant, 58.

⁶² Grant, 63.

The largest outflow of boat refugees from southern Vietnam started in April, 1978. Grant also notes that through the access to the refugees themselves, the following pattern emerged. There were two distinct groups. One was the Chinese, previously discussed, and the other, the Vietnamese who were closely associated with the pre-1975 political, military, and economic order in the south. Ages of the boat refugees from the south ranged widely, but most were under 35. There were also many women and children. Some young men said they left to avoid being drafted into the army, which was entangled in border wars with Cambodia and China, while others said they were the victims of political harassment and persecution.⁶³

As a result of the 1978 rupture with China, the SRV gathered 300,000 of its million ethnic Chinese, loaded them in small boats, towed them to Chinese waters and literally cut them adrift. The SRV also took this opportunity to rid its prisons of violent criminals, adding a few to each boat to increase the chance of an inhospitable voyage.

Thousands of these boat refugees were saved by the lights of offshore petroleum rigs, either those drilling for oil and natural gas off the coast of southern Thailand, or those operated by the Exxon off the north-east coast of Malaysia. As Bruce Grant notes in his work The Boat People:

The presence of the rigs and the relatively short distance between Vietnam and Malaysia helped to explain why nearly all the 200,00 who left southern Vietnam in the 18 months to mid 1979 first headed for Malaysia. The rigs also helped explain how several thousand small boats, many of them built for use only in coastal or inland waters, were able to complete the sea crossing even when those on board were inexperienced travelers, armed with little more than a compass and a school map. The rigs literally served as signposts in the sky at night.⁶⁴

⁶³ Grant, 99.

⁶⁴ Grant, 56

Though not arising from the Vietnam-China conflict, the mass exodus of Vietnamese, principally of Chinese ethnic origin, tarnished Vietnam's international image. Soon after the fall of Saigon in 1975, a relatively small number of people leaving Vietnam's shore in small boats attracted international attention. In the subsequent two years, the total remained around 20,000, mostly absorbed by Malaysia, Thailand, and Hong Kong. In 1978, the number rose sharply to 85,230 total refugees. By the middle of 1979, the epidemic had exploded into a crisis. China alone had received nearly 300,000, Hong Kong 62,000, France 61,000 and the United States 150,000, while more than 368,000 were awaiting resettlement in transit camps in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. At least half of the boat people were presumed to have died on the high seas due to starvation, drowning, leaky boats or piracy from Thai natives. From refugee accounts, it appeared certain that the Vietnamese government "officially" blessed the exodus but not before the refugees had each paid in gold, the government netting nearly 4 billion dollars in this process.⁶⁵

For those refugees who settled in nations other than in Southeast Asia, the journey was long and difficult. Most, when they left Vietnam, either landed in or were brought to American overseas bases like Utao in Thailand, where Vietnamese air force pilots flew their planes, or Subic Bay and Clark Field in the Philippines. From these bases most were flown to Wake or Guam, where the United States had set up a reception center to house 50,000 refugees for a maximum of 90 days. By the end of the first wave of refugees, Guam had already become severely overcrowded. Further, because of the

⁶⁵ D.R. SarDesai, Vietnam, Trials and Tribulations of a Nation," Long Beach, CA: Long Beach Publications, 1988, 189.

unanticipated numbers of refugees who arrived at U.S. bases, it was evident that processing and resettling of immigrants could not be done for Guam within three months. For other nations opening their doors to the refugees , the situation had become even more catastrophic.

The refusal of the governments of Southeast Asia, Malaysia with 78,200 refugees in transit camps, Thailand with 173,600 persons and Indonesia with 47,000 people, to accept any more refugees and begin turning the new arrival back to the seas, created an even greater international crisis. As D.R. SarDesai notes in his work, entitled Vietnam, Trails and Tribulations of a Nation, "The non-communist Southeast Asian countries regarded the refugees not only as a heavy burden on their scarce economic resources but as a potential security risk. Malaysia, opposed to an increase in its Chinese population because of its impact on the delicate racial balance, was most reluctant to accept any more of the ethnic Chinese refugees."⁶⁶

As the Southeast Asian countries began turning away people, the casualty rate for the refugees began to soar. Already destitute and impoverished, these refugees could turn nowhere else. Refugee officials knowledgeable about conditions at sea agree that the casualty rate among boat people heading for Hong Kong was low. Unlike the southern route from Vietnam, the way to Hong Kong was not beset with pirates. In addition, even though many of the boats that crept at an average of 7 knots per hour toward Hong Kong were powered only by sail, they stuck close to the coast of China and so could escape bad weather and stock up on essential supplies. However substantial the exodus was to Hong Kong for the Vietnamese, the journey to other nations was not so kind. However, reports

⁶⁶ SarDesai, 189.

have indicated that as many as 50 percent of all sea-faring refugee vessels never managed safely to reach the shores of other countries. Whether hit by piracy, plagued by disease or starvation, or turned away by safe-havens, the Vietnamese who left communism died in the arms of freedom. Ngoc Phuong Cao, in his work Learning True Love, state that Vietnamese women reported while in transit camps that they had tried to save boat people by paying fishermen to escort them to shore at night. As the story is told, the fishermen would take them secretly to French or American Embassy compounds, where, the next day, the diplomats heard their pleas for political asylum. The Embassies would then turn the boat people over to the proper authorities, but only after they had also prepared application for them to be accepted by French or American authorities.⁶⁷ It was estimated in 1979 that 30 percent of all refugee boats leaving southern Vietnam were hit by pirates; of those about a third suffered from RPM, or Rape, Pillage and Murder. Western officials have since lowered the estimate. A 1985 report by the UNHCR believed the number to be around 15-20 percent, or some 30,000-40,000 people were lost at sea and presumably died.

The massive refugee exodus was not a result merely of the harsh life in the SRV but was part of their diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia for the communist government. The refugees carried military, social, and economic problems on the countries that received them, making Vietnam a “better place” to live for those who remained. As David Dellinger notes in his work, Vietnam Revisited, by April, 1985, a meeting between Alexander Haig, and Vietnamese officials revealed that there still

⁶⁷ Ngoc Phuong Cao, Learning True Love, Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1993, 187.

remained in the area of Malaysia to Hong Kong roughly 100,000 Vietnamese refugees waiting to be resettled.⁶⁸

In an effort to display the severity of situation, I came upon a poem entitled “A Prayer For Lands,” while reading Bruce Grant’s The Boat People. Throughout the passage, the unknown Vietnamese refugee addresses the circumstances which led to their eventual departure from a land they called home. As I read the passage, I imagined the anguish of those who were forced into such a detrimental situation, fleeing the only land they had ever known.

A Prayer For Lands

Lost in the tempest
Out on the open sea
Our small boats drift.
We seek for land
During endless days and endless nights.
We are the foam
Floating on the vast ocean.
We are dust
Wondering in endless space.
Our cries are lost
In the howling wind.
Without food, without water
Our children lie exhausted
Until they cry no more.
We thirst for land
But are turned back from every shore.
Our distress signals rise and rise again
But the passing ships do not stop.
How many boats have perished?
How many families lie beneath the waves?
Lord Jesus, do you hear the prayer of flesh?
Lord Buddha, do you hear our voice
From the abyss of death?
O solid shore
We long for you!
We pray for mankind to be present today!

⁶⁸ Dellinger, 88

We pray for land to stretch its arms to us!
We pray that hope be given us
Today, from any land.
-A poem written by an unknown Vietnamese at a refugee camp in 1978.⁶⁹

Closing Remarks

It is virtually impossible for citizens of Western nations to fathom the brutality and chaos which has plagued the country of Vietnam. Two-thousand years of war, however, has not diminished the nation's determination to be free and independent economically and socially. Although Vietnam still suffers greatly, the global tensions that arose in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal have now subsided to the point that negotiations between the two countries have been able to commence. When the Second Indochina War had ended with the Americans, the Vietnamese peoples struggled for the right to live as they had done before. There is no doubt that the million-plus citizens who suffered under the program of thought-reform are still reeling from its effects even today. Many now have relocated in other countries thanks in part to the work of the UNHCR, Amnesty International, sympathetic Southeast Asian countries, and the United States.

Substantial media attention was recently given to a situation that arose in Los Angeles following an incident that brought a heavily populated Vietnamese community to the brink of disaster. A proprietor, it seems, decided that it would be a good gesture to fly the Revolutionary flag and Ho Chi Minh silk screen in his store window to display his patriotism for Ho Chi Minh and the Communist party. The Vietnamese community, agitated by this man's statements, boycotted the store and harassed the owner and his wife for what they termed as treason against democracy. Armed escorts were brought in

⁶⁹ Grant, 113.

to protect the man and his wife from the violence of protestors who camped outside the store in a display of anger. Ironically, the democratic process which allowed all of these Vietnamese immigrants to enter the country as refugees also upheld the mans democratic right to freedom of speech and expression, a right which was never upheld when the Vietnamese lived in their former nation

It is not coincidental that the plight of the Vietnamese situation still receives so much media attention even now. As citizens of the United States, we cannot understand the difficulties of leaving ancestral lands, losing families, or sacrificing individual liberties to a government bent on total control of its populous such as in Vietnam. It was our ancestors who dealt with these circumstances, something that only remains as a tale of forgotten times by younger generations. The fact that the government of Vietnam did not have specific programs to implement did not lead to its internal destruction.

Hanoi, in its defense, created many programs that in fact did help the Vietnamese economy slowly recover from the devastating effects of war through indoctrinations, physical labor, and rebuilding. It can now be said that the party's leaders failed to grasp the concept that any general reconstructive program had to be effective not only in terms of economic growth but also be able to resolve the wars more intangible but crucial social and human challenges. Forced re-education, relocation to remote and destitute wilderness, and the absence of basic humanitarian necessities. If the goal of this paper was to touch upon the basic problems which faced the peoples of Vietnam in the years that followed the Communist takeover of South Vietnam, the end product is a biased representation of the events which helped shape a nation in the midst of turmoil. I say biased only because further studies would entail a greater breadth of knowledge that is

— still not available to those outside the Vietnamese Communist Party. Whether or not the Communists have succeed in their quest to unify a country which has been faced with adversity for so long now is nothing more than a matter of how we choose to view the situation. Are the Vietnamese who still reside in Vietnam better off? I think not.

But perhaps my views do not concern a nation that prides itself on its heritage and ancestry. For those who made it safely to other areas of the world, they are more than eager to state their joy of separation from a repressive and totalitarian society. The question remains then why, on the flight into Saigon, were there so many elderly people crying as the plane touched down in Tan Son Nhut airport that hot May day in 1997? As an observer, I believe that it was perhaps a moment of for the relatives lost that brought them to reflection and induced them to tears. Perhaps it was the fear of reliving old associations and the thought of what they might find in their absence. Whatever the case may be, it's a beautiful expression of how far one person has to come to reunify themselves in spirit, mind and body. I will never forget the journey and the people who made it so meaningful.

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